

Patterns: the language of burn layout & placement

a design manifesto by Old Man Dale, of 3 Old Men

Preface

One morning in August 2016 I awoke to find via email that I was Placement Lead for Alchemy, the fall burn in Georgia. Not only that, since we were moving on to new land for this burn I would be responsible not just for placing all the theme camps and art projects but for designing the burn from the ground up as well.

This was not as big a problem as you might imagine. As you will see in the document itself, I had volunteered to be co-lead in order to have input in modifying the layout of the burn, which had been pretty unsatisfying to all the hippies the previous spring; so I regarded my sudden elevation as a golden opportunity to make some real changes to the way our burn was organized.

In the end I think I was successful, and I have been encouraged to publish this “manifesto” to the general burn community so that others might use it if they so desired.

So to all my fellow hippies out there: find your patterns and make them real.

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Patterns: the language of burn layout & placement

Objective:

To use the elements of *A Pattern Language* to develop a reasonably coherent philosophy of burn layout and placement.

Intro

Flashpoint Artists Initiative [FAI] is now on its second “new home” in as many burns and is like to have third soon enough. At Cherokee Farms we had settled comfortably into the landscape: Effigy Hill, Ragnarok, Back Pocket—we knew where they were and what they held for us.

In registering for placement, theme camps knew what to expect—Area 51 didn’t want Ragnarok, and 3 Old Men couldn’t use Roswell. We knew what the limits were.

Then, when we moved to Lavender Farms, everything was erased. It was literally “tabula rasa”—no roads, no infrastructure, no traditions or institutional memory to guide us. No one knew what to expect or what to ask for.

I worked with the Placement Team tangentially—chatting with the team lead about the land’s potential and pitfalls, outlining some of the possibilities for placement, and then assisting on Build Weekend to lay out the roads and the theme camps.

The team lead’s approach, and I supported him in this, was to more or less plop down the theme camps, see what happened during Euphoria, then make adjustments for Alchemy. That is the main reason I volunteered to be Co-Lead of Placement: to make those adjustments that I saw needed making.

Fooled me.

Now we are faced with *another* “tabula rasa,” only this time it’s Alchemy and our canvas is more restrictive than we are used to. For that reason alone I am interested in exploring ways to be more

explicit about how we both lay out the burn and then place theme camps within it.

Additionally, however, I am a firm believer in having a well-thought-out plan to guide our actions. Just as a good mission statement will influence every decision an organization makes, an overall philosophy such as the one I am proposing can serve future placement teams even after those of us who lead now have moved on.

A Pattern Language

I will be using *A Pattern Language*¹ (Alexander, *et al.*, 1977) as the basis for this philosophy. The ideas in this hefty volume — guidelines and algorithms for designing livable spaces — have guided me for decades now, in obvious ways at times and at other times in completely unexpected ways. The 253 “patterns” outlined by the authors were drawn from their experiences and observations as architects and planners in situations and cultures all over the world, and they ring true.

To give an immediate concrete example: last April when we were laying out Euphoria, I knew that we would eventually have to change the overall layout of theme camps to include **IDENTIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOODS** (14) and **PATHS AND GOALS** (120). Since I was just a flunky, and since we had agreed that this first burn at Lavender Farms would be an **ABORTIVE ATTEMPT**,² I didn’t really say anything about it. (“I know,” I thought, “I’ll volunteer to be Co-Lead for Alchemy”³...)

Sure enough, one of the major complaints about the new property was that it wasn’t “explorable.” The two straight roads left little to the imagination, according to the hippies, and they were right. It felt more like a strip mall than a burn.

I give this example to show that the concepts in *A Pattern Language* [APL] have *already* been applicable to us—and to forestall, perhaps, any objections that what follows is “mere prattle and no practice.” (Or, as Old Man Craig often says of my work, “too many words.”)

¹ http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Ecological_Building/A_Pattern_Language.pdf

² <http://lichtenbergianism/abortive-attempts>

³ Fooled me.

Caveat(s)

I am fully aware that all kinds of exigencies shape our burns, and I do not expect ever to be able simply to apply these ideas while ignoring reality. I am attempting to write a philosophical guide, not a rule book.

Not only that, but the ideas in *APL* are meant to design a living, growing, permanent—not to say utopian—society. For a temporary autonomous zone like a burn, we must apply the patterns with their broader metaphorical basis in mind.

Overview

The scope of *APL* is far more vast than the needs for any burn, with the 253 so-called “patterns” ranging from country-wide land use to individual rooms in individual homes. In the book, each pattern is presented as a problem, followed by some empirical research/data on the issue as found in the real world, and then a usable pattern presented as a “solution.”

Each pattern is linked to the other related patterns, both broader and narrower. Thus, a web of ideas is created, a “language” in the authors’ lingo. For our purposes, I have identified about twenty of these patterns that I believe have some level of applicability to our efforts in creating a meaningful, purposeful community.⁴

I think there are two levels of applicability. First comes the layout of the burn as a whole: roads, infrastructure, Effigy/Temple, APW, Center Camp, etc. Second comes the placement of theme camps: sound camps, neighborhoods, art, subcultures, etc. By keeping these patterns in mind while we make decisions about Little Big Jam and any future properties, we can set ourselves ahead of the curve and avoid at least some simple issues.

In the rest of this paper, I will present each pattern with an abbreviated version of *APL*’s solution statement, followed by some thoughts on how it applies to us. I will list at the end of each section the teams that would need to be included in decisions based on that pattern. I’ve included the original page number in *APL* where the full description of the pattern can be found for those who would like to explore further.

⁴ In fact, the authors instruct the reader to do just that: pick and choose only the immediately useful patterns, then construct the design language from there. (p. xxxv)

8. MOSAIC OF SUBCULTURES (P. 42)

BREAK THE CITY, AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, INTO A MOSAIC OF SMALL AND DIFFERENT SUBCULTURES.

Given that burn culture is itself a subculture, it might be difficult to understand why this pattern might be applicable. But within Alchemy there are several sub-subcultures — furies, kink, acid goth pixie, *et al.*

APL posits that in a wider society, it is a positive good to provide space for subcultures to inhabit: it is easier to sustain one's Hasidism, for example, in an area protected from encroachment by the larger society. While burn subcultures certainly seem to have no problem at all sustaining themselves, it's also true that often camps of a similar nature will form villages, and it is in this sense that we should view this pattern.

THEREFORE, we should insure that camps of any subculture are aware of the possibility of forming villages, and we should work to make it possible for them to do so.

A excerpt from research quoted by the authors may be of interest:

By contrast, the person who becomes whole states his own nature, visibly, and outwardly, loud and clear, for everyone to see. He is not afraid of his own self; he stands up for what he is; he is himself, proud of himself, recognising [sic] his shortcomings, trying to change the, but still proud of himself and glad to be himself.

But it is hard to allow that you which lurks beneath the surface to come out and show itself. it is so much easier to live according to the ideas of life which have been laid down by others, to bend your true self to the wheel of custom, to hide yourself in demands which are not yours, and which do not leave you full.

It seems clear, then, that variety, character, and finding your own self, are closely interwoven. In a society where a man can find his own self, there will be amply variety of character, and character will be strong. In a society where people have trouble finding their own selves, people will seem homogeneous, there will be less variety, and character will be weak. [p. 46]

Sounds like burners to me.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT

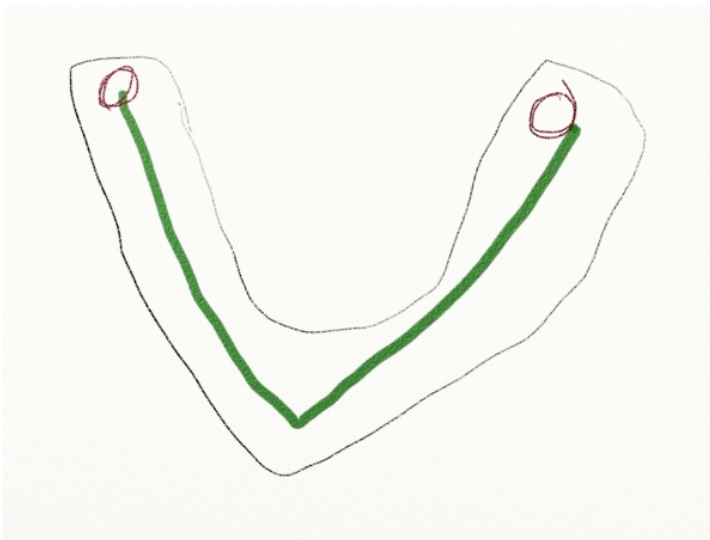
14. IDENTIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOOD (P. 80)

DEFINE NEIGHBORHOODS. KEEP MAJOR ROADS OUTSIDE THESE NEIGHBORHOODS.

It was the lack of IDENTIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOODS that generated the most complaints about Euphoria's layout at Lavender Farms (other than sound) and is the problem I am most anxious to avoid in future burns. To be sure, it is a problem that will take time to resolve organically as veteran camps learn the property, but it behooves leadership to provide a basic layout to the farm to give that natural process a footing.

Whereas at Cherokee Farms we had clearly defined NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES (15), Lavender Farms provided us with few, and those were hampered by fences, gates, and unusable land. Now, at Little Big Jam, we have property more like Cherokee — open areas, wooded areas, etc. It will be easier to set up “explorable areas.”

But it won't be automatic. As I noted earlier, the layout of Euphoria was problematic because it was essentially two straight lines.



Again, as an **ABORTIVE ATTEMPT** it was passable, but avoiding the issue to begin with at Little Big Jam will helpful.

THEREFORE, enhance the natural layout of the farm using the next ten patterns to provide deliberately separate, explorable neighborhoods.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, APW, LAMPLIGHTERS

15. NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARY (P. 86)

ENCOURAGE BOUNDARIES: GATEWAYS, BORDERS. USE NATURAL BOUNDARIES: CREEKS, WOODS, ROADS.

How do you know when you've moved from one neighborhood to another? At the Georgia burns, you've been able to go up a hill; follow a road into the woods; choose a fork in the road; go past Center Camp; go through a tree line; go around a lake.

The lights have gotten redder, the sound has gotten louder. Suddenly the camps are closer to the road, or further away, or more intimate, or much bigger.

Our neighborhoods are not necessarily homogeneous thematically. It's a psychological/spatial thing — "Whoa, I was *there* and now I'm *here*. Let's see what's *here*."

THEREFORE, use natural boundaries where possible to "divide" neighborhoods. Otherwise, create **GATEWAYS** and/or **SMALL PUBLIC SQUARES**.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, APW

24. SACRED SITES (P. 131)

PROTECT SACRED SITES.

We have at least two **SACRED SITES**: the Effigy and Temple. *APL's* pattern addresses concerns in the real world that such sites be protected from development and destruction. We have no such concerns at the burn, but the pattern is nonetheless valuable — we need to acknowledge the special status of these two structures and place them so that they are the focus of our plans.

Burning Man itself demonstrates the concept — the whole city radiates from the Man. While our layout is of necessity different, the idea is the same.

THEREFORE, after fire safety/perimeter concerns are addressed, place the Effigy and Temple in prominent spots, approached by **PROMENADES** and highly visible from as much of the burn as possible.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, FIRE SAFETY, PERIMETER, APW, EFFIGY, TEMPLE

28. ECCENTRIC NUCLEUS (P. 150)

DISTRIBUTE DENSITY UNEVENLY, DENSER IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TOWARDS THE "CENTER."

This pattern may not be applicable to a burn, at least not in practical terms. We have the space that we have, and x number of hippies to squeeze into it.

However, in theory we can look at varying the rhythm of the density of the burn, with smaller camps grouped together, alternating with larger, more spacious camps. This might be helpful in defining neighborhood boundaries, and at the very least will provide a subconscious feel of moving from one area to the other.

(Needless to say, the actual visual density of the burn is beyond our control, since the hippies are going to bring their stuff and set it up as they will.)

Also, if the land ever permits, it might be worth exploring placing open camping in what would be the high density areas in this pattern.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT

30. ACTIVITY NODES (P.163)

CREATE NODES OF ACTIVITY. PATHS LEAD TO THEM.

If you distribute all the *outward-facing* camps [see **PATHS & GOALS**] evenly throughout the burn, you run the risk of losing the energy that is generated when a lot of people gather in one place.

Likewise, if everything is spread out evenly, there is no ebb and flow of busy vs. quiet and it all blends together, making it harder for burners to orient themselves.

It's much better if we can find ways to place camps so that they can feed off each other and provide areas of focus for the pedestrian traffic.

THEREFORE, within the constraints of theme camp requests and the land itself, group two or three *outward-facing* camps together to attract burners, facing each other across a road or around a **SMALL PUBLIC SQUARE**.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, SOUND, ART

31. PROMENADE (P. 168)

ESTABLISH PROMENADES LINKING MAJOR ACTIVITY NODES, WITH MAJOR ATTRACTIONS AT EITHER END.

We had this at Cherokee and had at least laid out the basics at Lavender. The trick is to balance the need for main arteries with explorable areas, something we didn't have the opportunity to achieve at Lavender.

Clearly we need a **PROMENADE** leading to the **EFFIGY** — preferably we should have one leading to **TEMPLE** if it is separate from the **EFFIGY**, and in a perfect world they might be the two “major attractions” anchoring either end of the main **PROMENADE**.

Otherwise, **CENTER CAMP** should be prominently along a **PROMENADE**, and additional **PROMENADES** should be laid out to lead/distribute traffic to the neighborhoods. Outward-facing theme camps should line the roads.

THEREFORE, place roads so that they lead to major **ACTIVITY NODES**, leaving room for camp placement.

TEAMS: APW, PLACEMENT, LAMPLIGHTERS

33. NIGHT LIFE (P. 179)

FORM CENTERS FOR NIGHT LIFE.

Much of the burn counts as **NIGHT LIFE**, of course, but a major concern of nearly everyone seems to be placement and regulation of the sound camps, particularly of the loud 24/7 variety.

The placement of sound camps at Lavender was, by all accounts, unsuitable for the sound camps. (Those of us who were able to get to sleep over on the other leg had a different experience, of course.) Overlapping, competing sound environments were counterproductive and not enjoyable individually.

This kind of setup is unkind to our sound camps and not in keeping with the spirit of the burn, certainly. We need to provide the camps and their clientele every reasonable opportunity to get their boogie on.

On the whole, though, it seems preferable to contain most sound camps in a **NIGHT LIFE** district, both for **SUBCULTURE** and **IDENTIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOOD** purposes.

THEREFORE, a balance must be struck: loud party camps should be placed in their own neighborhood (or neighborhoods, if land permits) but arranged so that sound bleed is not excessive.

This, to me, is the most difficult aspect of placement.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, SOUND

44. LOCAL TOWN HALL (P. 236)

ESTABLISH EASILY ACCESSIBLE AREAS FOR GOVERNANCE.

Again, *APL* is addressing a fairly utopian vision of real-world urban planning, but the applicability of this pattern for our burns is clear. **CENTER CAMP, RANGERS, CONNEXUS**, etc. should all be centrally located and accessible to all burners.

Preferably these stations should be near each other and on a **PROMENADE**.

Therefore, place **CENTER CAMP** and all administrative teams in a central location, highly visible and in the center of traffic flow.

TEAMS: CENTER CAMP, RANGERS, APW, LNT, PLACEMENT

53. MAIN GATEWAYS (P. 276)

MARK BOUNDARIES WITH GATEWAYS.

This pattern is something to think about, if not necessarily for this burn — mark entrances to otherwise undefined areas with pylons or kiosks, or encourage camps to do that.

Also, look for ways to use natural gateways as entrances to neighborhoods. (Think entrance to the Back Pocket, past the showers and through the tree line, or further to Roswell, through a literal gate.)

Above all, make the entrance to the burn — at Gate, Education Station, and the campus itself — as gate-like as possible.

THEREFORE, look for natural GATEWAYS to use as boundary markers, and failing that, make them.

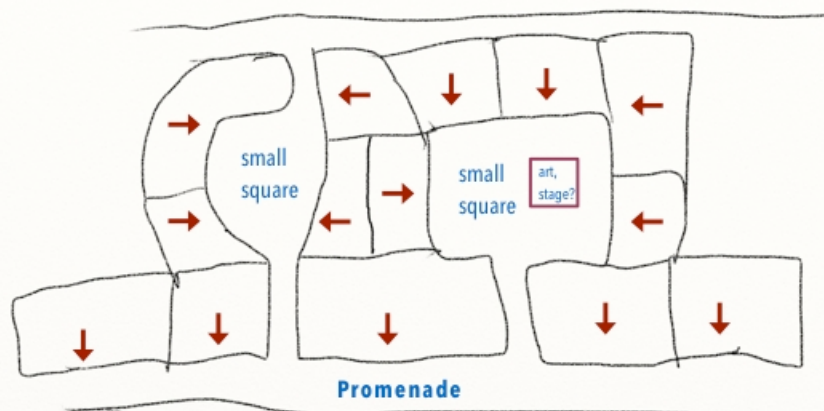
TEAMS: PLACEMENT, APW, GATE, EDUCATION, PARKING

61. SMALL PUBLIC SQUARES (P. 310)

CREATE SMALL SQUARES TO SERVE AS THE FOCUS OF CAMPS, ART, ACTIVITIES. KEEP THEM SMALL, 30–50 FEET ACROSS.

This is the pattern we are not currently using that I think can provide us with the most benefit.

As we lay out this new venue — and any future venues — let's look at using small (30–50 ft) central squares to group camps around:



Use these squares for art or for **ACTIVITY NODES**. For example, invite Bizzarnival to place their attractions in the square, or 3 Old Men their labyrinth.

These squares would automatically define **NEIGHBORHOODS** and make the burn immediately explorable.

THEREFORE, instead of trying to string all the theme camps out along **PROMENADES** or other linear patterns, look for ways to branch off main arteries into small squares, around which theme camps can face each other and in which we might deliberately place items of interest.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, ART

120. PATHS AND GOALS (P. 585)

LAY OUT PATHS TO CONNECT GOALS.

Sometimes a pattern is so obvious that it seems silly to include it. But where we had settled into what now seems a natural layout at Cherokee Farms, we now have to create that naturalness ourselves. It's best to be conscious of even the obvious.

One aspect of this is to characterize camps as *outward-facing* or *inward-facing*. An outward-facing camp is one that provides an activity or service for the burn as a whole: 3 Old Men and their labyrinth, or Circus Combustus and their performances, or Tiki Madness and their bar. They *want* All the Hippies to come to their camp.

An inward-facing camp, on the other hand, is not so performance-oriented. They're not unwelcoming — they may in fact be open chill/lounge spaces — but they're not set up to encourage All the Hippies to troop through. They may even be just a group of burners who are bound by a common interest.

Outward-facing camps are our **GOALS**, i.e., the places that we need to shunt traffic to. If we can find ways to distribute them, then we can distribute traffic and enhance the sense of the burner that something is always “around the corner.”⁵

Make the paths intersect and loop. Make the **PUBLIC SQUARES** pass-through, not cul-de-sacs. Don't plan dead ends unless absolutely necessary. The burn doesn't have to be immediately comprehensible — personally, I think it is not a bad thing for a virgin burner to get lost, or for it to take them two or three burns to get the hang of the burn as a whole.

⁵ I want to make a plea not to be misunderstood on this point: in no way am I suggesting that inward-facing camps are in some way “lesser” than outward-facing camps. No one appreciates the value of a quiet camp more than I!

THEREFORE, think of outward-facing camps and their activities as **GOALS** — use them to anchor neighborhoods, and connect them with **PATHS**.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, ART

126. SOMETHING ROUGHLY IN THE MIDDLE (P. 606)

IN THE SQUARES, PUT ART OR ACTIVITY.

Consider the burn as a sequence of centers.

Centers as macro: **EFFIGY**, **CENTER CAMP**, **TEMPLE**, major outward-facing camps like Incendia or Detoured Souls — each drawing traffic in, along **PATHS** or **PROMENADES**.

Centers as micro: individual art projects in squares, small stages perhaps for acoustic music

THEREFORE, give the hippies something to focus on, deliberately.

TEAMS: PLACEMENT, ART, EFFIGY, TEMPLE, CENTER CAMP

Conclusion

I hope the ideas that I've summarized here seem useful to the teams. As I stated in the introduction, this is not meant to be a "rule book," in that, for example, we would override Fire Safety's decision about Effigy simply because it conflicts with a desirable pattern.

Indeed, all of this idle philosophy may be absolutely moot once it has to face the reality of the land and the requirements of the burn: fire safety, emergency access, power/infrastructure needs, etc. That's OK — the theory can at least provide us with goals and with guidance to those goals.

At the very least, using the patterns that have worked in cultures across the planet will be a better approach than thinking of layout and placement merely as a giant jigsaw puzzle, and thinking that as long as all the pieces fit, we have found an adequate solution.

I hope to do better.